

# Proposal for Austin Animal Advisory Commission in support of the “No Kill” Initiative

Submitted by Love-A-Bull, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization

[www.love-a-bull.org](http://www.love-a-bull.org)



## Who is Love-A-Bull?

Love-A-Bull is a 501(c)(3) charity that promotes education, advocacy and responsible ownership on behalf of “Pit Bulls,” Pit Bull mixes and their families. We have over 525 members registered on Meet Up.com (the number is far higher when family members are included); over 2500 Facebook “fans” and are followed by approximately 400 people on Twitter. Love-A-Bull participates in a variety of activities, including:

- Promoting free and low-cost spay/neuter for Pit Bulls through Emancipet;
- Supporting Pit Bull rescue (with groups like Austin Pets Alive!, Blue Dog Rescue, Happy Endings Dog Rescue, and Lucky Mutts Rescue) as well as providing fosters, need-based financial assistance and re-homing services;
- Providing a free training program for all dues-paying members at Southpaws Playschool;
- Participating in the Austin Pit Bull Task Force;
- Promoting achievement of Canine Good Citizen status through the American Kennel Club, and urging our members to participate with Divine Canines in therapy dog work;
- Monitoring breed-specific legislation, advocating positions to local, state and national legislative bodies and representatives;
- We hold an annual Pit Bull Awareness Day, to add support to events around the country. Last year’s events featured John Garcia of Best Friends Animal Society, the trainer who rehabilitated 22 of the Michael Vick Dogs, as our special guest. Garcia was present for a showing of his popular National Geographic show, *Dogtown*, which featured several of the rehabilitated Vick dogs, led a downtown dog parade with several hundred participants and presented two in-services for rescue groups and TLAC volunteers and staff on how to deal with rehabilitating Pit Bulls in shelter or rescue environments. We use our fun events as a way to educate and show the public that our dogs are well-behaved and great family members.
- We have also done outreach and participation at the Violet Crown Festival, City of Austin vaccination clinic, Pet Fest in San Marcos, Barktoberfest, Barkitecture, South Congress First Thursdays, Ice Cream Festival, movie night at the Alamo Drafthouse, Poochinis and Peticures at Lofty Dog, the Thunderbird Subs Turkey Trot, and other community events.

We are a young nonprofit group, but have already started to gain a respected reputation locally and nationally. We believe that education, outreach and non-discriminatory laws are always the best solution to public safety concerns.



### Why is Love-A-Bull Needed?

Love-A-Bull grew out of an existing Meetup Group with close to 200 pit bull owners, and was transformed into an active nonprofit organization with currently over 525 members with the mission to provide **education and advocacy and promote responsible ownership**. Pittie owners encounter several unique issues for which Love-A-Bull tries to provide guidance, support and collective voice, most notably media stereotypes and sensationalism; discrimination by lawmakers, apartment renters, home owners associations, insurance companies, and eating establishments; and lack of public understanding of the true nature, behavior and traits of pit bull-type dogs. Love-A-Bull members act as vocal and informed advocates for

misunderstood breeds and to impress upon others the value of treating them as loving family members.

### What is a "Pit Bull"?

There is no such breed as a "Pit Bull." Rather, it is a generic category that has come to include certain recognized breeds such as the American Staffordshire Terrier, the American Pit Bull Terrier, Staffordshire Bull Terriers, and sometimes Bull Terriers and American Bulldogs.

See <http://www.akc.org/breeds/> and <http://www.ukcdogs.com/WebSite.nsf/WebPages/LrnBreedInfoFullList>

Animal Control Officer and shelter workers receive no specific training in identifying breeds, and even DNA testing proves that this is next to impossible to accomplish. As has been discussed at the Animal Advisory Commission, this leaves shelter staff, with the difficult task of trying to identify what dogs are "Pit Bulls" when many, many breeds have similar characteristics. Consider the test below. Only one dog falls under the category "Pit Bull," while the remaining 24 are pure breeds of another type.

There are over 20 different dogs that can easily be confused with "Pit Bulls." It may seem harmless to identify a multitude of shelter dogs as "Pit Bulls" when they are not; however, with numerous insurance carriers refusing to insure "Pit Bulls,"; numerous apartment buildings refusing housing for "Pit Bulls" and bite statistics counting nearly every dog that "looks" like a Pit Bull" as a "Pit Bull," misidentification is not harmless. It is a serious problem for those of us in the community who are affected. Moreover, it can be the death knell for that dog in the shelter. Statistically, 74% of dogs labeled "Pit Bulls" at TLAC will be killed. This is compared to their 22% population. Clearly, this "label" is unpopular. Terming these dogs "Mixed Breed" and simply disclosing that shelter staff cannot know breed (because it is indeed impossible to know in many cases), except for in cases where a breed can be more clearly identified is not only intellectually honest, but would help the shelter reach its No-Kill goal.

The following chart illustrates why it is not only intellectually honest to label dogs as "Mixed Breeds" when they come into the shelter, but the current system of labeling every dog with a "stocky head" or "bulky chest" a Pit Bull is flawed and actually fails wholeheartedly to capture breed correctly. Most of the dogs entering TLAC are Mixed Breeds. A DNA test of Mixed Breed dogs with similar characteristics to those normally labeled "Pit Bulls" and (those that probably would not be labeled Pit Bulls) show surprising results. Most of the dogs that had "Pit Bull"-like qualities are actually everything but Pit Bulls, ranging from Boxers to Bulldogs to Cocker Spaniels. Whereas the dog that looked the least like a Pit Bull is actually



a Pit Bull Mix. This testing shows that we cannot “diagnose” dogs with our eyes, and the more honest approach is to tell the public that the dog is of Mixed origin, and could be of any number of breeds.

Pick the Pit Bull...



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9



10



11



12



13



14



15



16



17



18



19



20



21



22



23



24



25

(It's even more difficult to Pick the Pit Bull Mix... see attachment)



## The “Pit Bull PR Problem” in one Complicated Nutshell...

Pit bull owners routinely defend their pets as lovable and gentle. So why do we hear so much about pit bull attacks? The news media seems more interested in putting stories out that “sell” than reporting stories that are even-handed or are always in the public’s best interest. For example, between 1990-1998, when the nation’s murder rate declined by 20%, the number of murder stories on network newscasts increased by 600% (excluding stories about O.J. Simpson). (Steven Stark, “Local News: The Biggest Scandal on TV,” *Washington Monthly* (June 1997) at 38-41) cited in *The Culture of Fear*, Barry Glassner at xxi (1999). As a result, public perception was that murder was on the rise. In response to polling, people stated that the reason they believed murder was on the rise was not personal experience, but rather what they saw in the “news.” Ibid at xi, xxi.

The Pit Bull phenomenon is very similar. Consider the following study performed by the National Canine Research Council: In August of 2007, four serious dog attacks were tracked. The attacks involved four different breeds (only one involved a pit bull). All of the attacks were severe, ranging from a fatal head and neck injury to severe hospitalizations (the fatality was not caused by the pit bull). The two hospitalizations and the fatality were reported by local newspapers either **one or two times**. In contrast, the pit bull attack was reported **over 230 times** in national and international newspapers and in major television networks, including CNN, MSNBC and FOX. This severe bias has a devastating effect on public perception and takes a toll on public safety.

Positive stories therefore have very little chance of receiving coverage or air time. Reporters are not as interested in the “warm and fuzzy” examples of how responsible owners are promoting their dogs as breed ambassadors – which exist in abundance—and so, we struggle to right the balance of negative vs. positive in the news. We need to immediately address this imbalance on a large scale if we are ever to achieve 90% live outcomes with shelter full of adoptable dogs that are either pit bulls or viewed as pit bulls, and change the perception of pitties in the mainstream, policymakers and among potential adopters.

### What Love-A-Bull is Proposing:

We are proposing a large-scale, comprehensive public relations campaign that would focus on rehabilitating the image of pit bulls and bully mixes, to achieve a variety of outcomes: **increase adoptions, reduce needless killing of shelter dogs, educate owners and the public, and raise the level of responsible ownership**. This campaign would ideally include and address several components: **usage of both traditional and emerging media outlets, implementation of policy changes, forging cooperative partnerships with local groups (animal and non-animal related), and distributing and reinforcing consistent long-term messaging**. For the sake of starting discussion, we have separated these components into categories: **Easy Wins, Campaign Messaging, and Policy/Procedure Changes**.

❖ Easy Wins (things that can be done immediately with little or no impact to city budget)

### Image Repositioning through New Shelter Kennel Tags:

- Change the tags from “Pit Bull” to exact breed if known (Staffordshire Terrier, American Pit Bull Terrier, etc.), or if mix: Mixed Breed
- Use colorful, bright tags and friendly images to attract attention, reduce fear
- Feature a “myth buster” on each tag or positive attribute on each tag:
  - Myth # 1: Pit bulls have locking jaws.  
Fact: The jaws of a pit bull are constructed the same as any other dog except for the size difference. What they do have is strength and tenacity when they grasp on to something. This is a common trait among the terrier breeds, be it a pittie or Jack Russell

- According to the American Temperament Test Society, providing statistics for various breeds tested for temperament, the American Pit Bull Terrier had a favorable rating of 84.1%, the American Staffordshire Terrier 83.9% and the Staffordshire Terrier 85.2% which was higher than the Golden Retriever at 83.8%.

- Position information on pittie kennels as “personal ads” designed to present detailed information in casual, relaxed format, such as: “Sweet young attractive female with stunning brown eyes seeks permanent cuddle partner and exercise buddy, loves walks on the beach, candle-lit dinners, leftovers, and lots of heavy petting; Enjoys movies at home or strolls downtown; Adores kids but isn’t a cat-lover.”

#### **Lower Adoption Fees for Pits**

- This would have an impact on shelter revenue, but relatively slight, and could be done periodically if not permanently, such as has been done with cats; or adoptions could be “promotionally packaged” as “dog adoption plus free training” through Love-A-Bull

#### **Love-A-Bull Free Training and Group Flyers**

- Inserted in Adoption Packets
- Posted in the Adoption Area

#### **Promote the Bully Breeds in City Facilities and on Vehicles**

- Word of mouth by Volunteers and postings on Craigslist
- Educational Information in community (existing or already planned shelter outreach should incorporate pit-positive messaging whenever possible)
- Colorful, fun posters showing bully breeds as family pets with children, therapy dogs, etc.
- Magnetic signage for sides of Animal Control vehicles

#### **Advertise Pit of the Week**

- Local TV News Channels
  - KVUE's Pet of the Week
  - News 8 Austin Pet Pointers
- Radio Stations
  - AM, FM, Community, Public
  - Spanish language
- TLAC, Humane Society websites



#### **Promote Love-A-Bull as Adopter/Owner Resource**

- Link to Love-A-Bull's website on TLAC website or as info given to pittie adopters by TLAC counselors

#### **Put “Teeth” into the Pit Bull Task Force**

- Resume regular meetings, urge attendance and assign duties in support of established goals

#### **Continue to Place Pits into Adoption Program and Promote to Off-Site Adoptions**

- Many of the empty kennels in the adoption side could be filled with adoptable pits and many could win hearts of adopters if given the opportunity to shine at off-site adoption sites.

## ❖ Campaign Messaging

It is crucial to put forward a consistently positive message about pitties that appeals to potential adopters and those who may have misinformation about these breeds. Love-A-Bull recommends hiring a PR consultant to create a campaign that “brands” pitties in a positive way and promotes the attributes and family-friendly nature of these dogs. The messaging and campaign elements should be incorporated into a variety of traditional and emerging media outlets, such as radio, tv, web, bus wraps, billboards, print materials (posters, flyers, handouts, brochures, postcards), social media (Facebook, Twitter, blogging), newsletters, and other creative ideas. In addition, city staff and volunteers will need to be trained on the messaging in order to be consistent and effective, as well as to go furthest in effecting lasting long-term changes in public perception. We have compiled a listing of possible pricing for some traditional media buys (see attachment), but a PR professional will be able to advise on the specifics and scalability of campaign implementation. Love-A-Bull is a willing partner on the costs, planning, and implementation efforts.

The campaign should include opportunities for significant community partnering and support. Without widespread buy-in by local groups, the campaign will fall flat. Thus, it will be important to involve the Pit Bull Task Force, rescue groups, other nonprofits such as Emancipet, Animal Trustees of Austin, Fix Austin, all dog breed Meetup Groups, etc. so that the messaging can be dispersed by more than just the city and Love-A-Bull. Stakeholders in the community can also be approached (veterinarians, animal product retailers, animal service providers, trainers, etc.). To truly succeed, there should be a concerted effort towards inclusivity and various avenues of expression, education and promotion. While TLAC has participated in the past, the City of Austin should consider extending sponsorship of Love-A-Bull’s Pit Bull Awareness Day to increase support for the campaign.

## ❖ Policy/Procedure Changes

In addition to the public relations campaign, it is also important to examine and address related issues that contribute to overpopulation of pit bulls in the shelter system, most notably **outreach to apartment management associations** and the **addition of a behaviorist on staff at TLAC**. The campaign to improve the image of pitties can only go so far in promoting dogs for homes, but the problems remain that adopters have nowhere to live with their pits and the behavior of pits in the shelter can be misunderstood, leading to higher numbers of needless killing. The campaign can include these two important policy shifts – by extending messaging to apartment managers and training of volunteers and staff on pit behavior so that accurate information and understanding can be exercised to the fullest extent.

### Importance of Reaching out to Apartment Management Associations

*"One of the simplest and most important things the humane community can do to boost adoptions and keep animals in homes they have is to work with landlords and tenants to increase the number of rental units that allow companion animals." -- Leslie Wilson, "Creating a Pets in Rental Housing Program in Your Community"*

It is incredibly difficult to find housing if you own a pit bull or a pit bull mix. If an apartment complex allows dogs, they usually have a maximum weight limit and even more of them have breed restrictions. A quick survey revealed:

- Austin Apartment Locator.com covers the entire Austin area, and their representative states that there were no apartments in Austin that accept pit bulls.
- AllAustin.com is an apartment locator that works with almost every apartment in the Austin area, and their representative did not know of any places in Austin that accept pit bulls.



- Music City Apartments finds apartments in Austin, Cedar Park, Round Rock, Pflugerville, Leander and Lake Travis TX. A representative who had been working with the company for 15 years said he knew of only one place that accepts pit bulls.

How can we expect people to adopt pit bulls when they have no place to keep them? If the campaign does not include a discussion with apartment managers, there can be no real progress made in increasing the adoption of pitties.

The policy shift that needs to take place should address misperceptions of breed characteristics, the liability question, and possible solutions. The most common response from apartments as to why they don't accept certain breeds of dogs is because their insurance doesn't cover them. Apartments need coverage for ALL breeds of dogs. If a resident dog bites someone and is at any point identified as being at all mixed with a restricted breed, if the owner doesn't have breed registration papers that prove otherwise, their insurance is useless if they don't cover ALL breeds of dogs. Apartments can also offer for their tenants to get their own renter's insurance policy with a company that covers their animal. Breed restrictions come from concerns over the dog's behavior, and since any breed of dog can bite, breed restrictions don't confront the real problem. There are plenty far more effective alternatives that DO address the biggest factors in dog bites: ownership and dog behavior. Ideas such as a letter of recommendation from a previous landlord, a letter from the dog's vet vouching for the dog's good behavior and owner's keeping current on their care, proof of the animal being neutered (intact males are 3.5 times more likely to have biting incidences as neutered males), a certificate from a behavioral class, and pet interviews all deal with the owner's level of responsibility and the individual dog's behavior rather than a nebulous generalization with no real evidence.

Responsible pet owners make good tenants because they have to look harder for a place to live, which means that they are more likely to stay put. The study "Companion Animal Renters and Pet-Friendly Housing in the U.S" found that tenants in pet-friendly rentals stayed an average of 46 months, compared with 18 months for those in rentals prohibiting pets. This effect would be dramatically increased by the extreme difficulty of finding a rental that allows Pit Bulls. Some related information in the study:

- Tenants who kept pets illegally remained significantly less time in their rental units than tenants who legally kept pets. (people are going to sneak in pits anyway, if it's legal they'll stay longer)
- Over 20% of tenants surveyed reported that they kept pets illegally
- Landlords with tenants harboring pets illegally receive none of the benefits of keeping pets legally (screening, pet contract, pet deposit) yet suffer all the potential costs of having animals
- There is little, if any, difference in damage between tenants with pets and tenants without pets
- Only 9% of the overall rental housing is open to all pets, half of American households have companion animals, over half of renters in the study reported that they would probably have one or more pets if allowed to do so
- Costs of damage to the property were found to be far less than the amount of the average monthly rent or the average pet deposit
- On average, tenants with companion animals are willing and able to pay more for the ability to live with their pets
- Rental property owners who offer pet-friendly housing not only have the potential to more than cover any potential risks but to actually increase their bottom-line profits.

Sources: *Pets in Rental Housing*, Leslie Wilson, 2000

*Companion Animal Renters and Pet-Friendly Housing in the U.S.*, Pamela Carlisle-Frank Ph.D., Joshua M. Frank Ph.D., Lindsey Nielsen 2005

## Importance of hiring a full-time behaviorist on staff at TLAC

Love-A-Bull is routinely contacted by TLAC volunteers who express desire to pull a pittie from the shelter who is "acting out," has been labeled "aggressive," is placed in rabies isolation because of a nip, and is in jeopardy of either being removed from the adoption program or being put down. First-hand experience with these dogs has repeatedly revealed that the "acting out" is not true aggression, but most often due to kennel frustration, anxiety, lack of exercise or lack of human stimulation, and in general, lack of human understanding of what the behavior represents. There is strong evidence that Austin's homeless pets desperately need a full-time behaviorist at TLAC to accurately evaluate their behavior. Animal behavior requires a very complex understanding to correctly interpret, and when the stakes are life or death, it's important to have someone who has had the proper training to handle such responsibility. For example, the Humane Society of the United States says "evaluations can be adversely affected by factors such as stressful shelter environments", yet TLACs animals are being evaluated in their kennel or cage where they have been housed amidst hundreds of other highly stressed animals for the past 24 or 72 hours. TLAC needs the expert direction of a full-time behaviorist to give every animal the fair chance at life that they deserve.

We understand that hiring someone with a Masters Degree in Applied Animal Behavior may not be possible, given the City's budget, but it is the ideal. At the very least, a group of individuals with such credentials should be invited to rotate to serve as consultants to TLAC staff and volunteers to advise on animal (and particularly pittie) behavior. Because pit bulls account for such a large percentage of TLACs dogs, it is also vital that the behaviorist be an expert at working with pitties and pit mixes to accurately understand the nuances of these breeds. Requiring that the behaviorist at least be a Certified Professional Dog Trainer will give an appropriate standard of competency for this position.

John Garcia, manager of Dogtown at the Best Friends Animal Sanctuary in Utah and head trainer of the 22 most difficult pit bulls rescued from Michael Vick's dog fighting ring, has offered to help train staff at TLAC to properly evaluate dog behavior. The campaign could include provision for Garcia to conduct training on a periodic basis to ensure that education continues and is implemented with regard to correctly interpreting and addressing pit behavior so that it does not result in true aggression or needless killing.

<http://www.amrt.net/tt.htm> (excellent article on why temperament testing isn't as effective as behaviorist evaluation)

An anecdote from a Love-A-Bull Member, Renee Manly:

*Our city shelter desperately needs a behaviorist. When I worked as an animal care worker at the Town Lake Animal Center, we once received a very pregnant dog. I moved her to her birthing kennel and entered notes on her profile about what an incredibly friendly dog she was. A few days later, Palmer Neuhaus of Austin Pets Alive! was at the shelter to take her to her foster family because TLAC had scheduled her for euthanasia. Apparently when the Disposition Committee evaluated her, she was growling and barking at them so they scheduled her to die. It took just five minutes for Palmer to remove a visual barrier and convince Happy Girl that she was a friend, at which point Palmer was allowed to freely handle her and her puppies. I was appalled that this dog would have been killed for fulfilling a very natural instinct (protecting her young). Much is the same for animals that are scheduled to die because they respond defensively to being poked at with a pen or having someone blow in their face in the incredibly stressful environment of an animal shelter. I terminated my employment with TLAC primarily for this reason: I could no longer stomach the animals being condemned to die for reacting as animals do, for the fact that this was happening every day. When I was employed there, animals were rated on a scale from 1-7, 1 being extremely aggressive or ill and 7 being the perfect candidate for adoption. The following year, it had been reduced to red (unadoptable), green (adoptable), or yellow (anywhere in between). It's completely nonsensical to reduce the wide range of animal behavior into just three groups. Unsurprisingly, this change occurred after their behaviorist, Diane Mollaghan (M.A. in Applied Animal Behavior) ceased employment with the city.*



## In Conclusion

Love-A-Bull is proposing the adoption and implementation of a full-scale, comprehensive public relations campaign to help promote a more positive and accurate image of the pit bull and pit bull mix dogs currently in the shelters, and to help adopters and shelter staff gain access to resources. There are a variety of factors that will shape the feasibility of such a campaign, including scope, timeframe, media utilized and available resources, but at the very minimum, Love-A-Bull is recommending the following steps with approximate corresponding costs\*:

- Contracting with a public relations professional to outline campaign and advise on implementation (\$3000 - \$5,000)
- Implementing “easy wins” (little to no fiscal impact)
- Implementing media buys (depending on scope, \$20,000 - \$35,000)
- Training staff, volunteers and partnering organizations on campaign messaging
- Holding public awareness events and engaging opportunities to spread awareness of the campaign
- Hiring a full-time behaviorist (\$50,000) or contracting with a qualified consultant to train staff and volunteers (\$40/hour)
- Agreeing to prioritize and pursue policy discussions with Apartment Management Association

\*Some services may be donated or provided in-kind

In order to successfully reach a 90% live outcome goal, it is necessary to allocate time and resources in addressing the obstacles to adoption and perception that certainly exist with the largest dog population within the shelter, the pit bulls and pit bull mixes. Love-A-Bull is fully committed to contributing and working towards this important mission.



Former Michael Vick dog, Jhumpa, relaxing with his new owner